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# Learning ethnographically during the year abroad: modern languages students in Europe and Latin America

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports findings from a longitudinal qualitative study that explored the ethnographic learning processes of 10 modern languages students who spent one full academic year abroad, having first completed successfully an *Introduction to Ethnography* course in the UK. It begins from the argument that although significant attempts have been made to integrate ethnography into modern languages undergraduate degree programmes, relatively little is known about its actual impact on modern languages sojourners. Drawing on active interviews and reflective diaries that were designed to investigate this impact from shortly before participants embarked on their year abroad to the moment they returned, the thematic and critical discourse analysis of the data focuses attention on two key themes: students' perceptions of their host cultures and the impact of ethnography on students' perceptions. Findings from the first theme reveal that participants' perceptions were derogatory and that they used a number of mitigating discourse strategies to avoid creating a negative impression on the researchers. Findings from the second theme suggest that ethnography made little impact on most participants, given that their derogatory perceptions of the "foreign other" remained almost intact throughout the year abroad. The paper discusses possible reasons for these findings, arguing that the contextual nature of ethnographic inquiry does not always enable modern languages sojourners to dismantle the cultural generalisations they may make.

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## Introduction

Since ERASMUS<sup>1</sup> (European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) was launched in 1987, study and residence abroad sojourns of up to a year have become increasingly frequent among university students. Indeed, the European Commission (2015) has stated that, during its first 25 years, the scheme enabled nearly three million students to spend part of their degree programme in another European Union or partner country and estimated that, by the year 2020, an additional two million university students will have participated in study and residence abroad sojourns under the scheme's auspices. Coleman (2013) and Kinginger (2009) have claimed that these sojourns enable students to acquire a more sophisticated understanding of the cultural differences

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that affect one's relationship with others, thereby becoming better able to adapt to new situations and requirements.

Particularly prominent among this group of sojourners are modern languages learners pursuing an applied languages undergraduate degree in the UK. These learners spend a full academic year immersed in a country where the target language is spoken by native speakers, in the belief that such immersion results in greater linguistic and cultural gains (Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004). Albeit scant, some empirical research has explored the experience of being a British modern languages student abroad, providing contrasting insights into the learning that can occur during this experience. Alred and Byram (2006), for instance, explored the educational impact of the year abroad on undergraduate learners of French ten years after their sojourn. Participants reported marked changes in self-perception that resulted in a deeper understanding of otherness and how to relate to it. Meier and Daniels (2013) traced the developmental trajectory of a group of modern languages students before, during and after their year abroad. Findings from interviews and a nominal voting exercise revealed that the year abroad made little impact on these students, since most engaged exclusively with members of their own group. In line with other scholars (e.g. Jackson & Oguro, 2018), Meier and Daniels (2013) argued that intercultural learning is not an automatic outcome of the period abroad and concluded that, without carefully designed pedagogic interventions, learners are in danger of returning home with a less positive attitude to the host culture.

The first ever systematic attempt to make the year-abroad experience more meaningful for second languages sojourners was made by Roberts et al. (2001), as part of a seminal research and development project involving modern languages programmes run at Thames Valley University, Ealing, London. The Ealing Ethnography Research Project aimed to develop an approach to language-and-culture learning that drew on the discipline of anthropology, integrating it into the undergraduate curriculum so that learners of modern languages become ethnographers during their sojourn. To achieve this, the project was divided into three stages: (1) an *Introduction to Ethnography* course taught before departure; (2) an ethnographic study carried out whilst abroad; and (3) upon return, writing up the ethnography in the foreign language. Despite asserting that none of these stages aimed to turn students into fully-fledged anthropologists, Roberts et al. (2001; see also Barro et al., 1998) provided evidence that participants developed enough of an ethnographic imagination to enable them not only to participate directly in the everyday lives of a group, but also to take advantage of the invaluable opportunities that anthropologists have often claimed ethnography offers:

Ethnography offers all of us the chance to step outside our narrow cultural backgrounds, to set aside our socially inherited ethnocentrism and to apprehend the world from the viewpoint of other human beings who live by different meaning systems. Ethnography is more than a tool for anthropologists to study exotic cultures. It is a pathway into understanding the cultural differences that make us what we are as human beings. (Spradley, 2016, pp. vii-viii)

However, beyond this empirical study, relatively little prior research has explored the actual impact that ethnography may make on year-abroad students of modern languages. The present paper addresses this gap by reporting findings from a longitudinal qualitative study of advanced modern languages learners who spent the third year of their undergraduate degree programme abroad, having first completed successfully an

*Introduction to Ethnography* course in the UK. The study explored the ethnographic learning processes of those students from shortly before they embarked on their year abroad to the moment they returned, collecting data through semi-structured active interviews and reflective diaries to capture the developmental trajectories of participating students. (Developed by Holstein and Gubrium in 1995, the “active interview” constitutes an approach to qualitative interviewing that regards researchers and interviewees as active co-constructors of meaning in all phases of the interview process.) This research aims to advance the pedagogical knowledge base and understanding of ethnography within year abroad contexts, and to serve as an important catalyst for continuing discussions about how to prepare students more effectively for contact in unfamiliar cultures.

The paper has the following structure: to provide an essential context for this study, we begin with a detailed discussion of the *language learner ethnographer*, as introduced by Roberts et al. (2001) in their Ealing Ethnography Research Project. This is followed by a review of the very few empirical studies that have been carried out on such learners to date. We then present the ethnography course that our participants attended prior to departure, along with their profiles, before turning attention to the methods used to collect and analyse the interview and diary data. The findings of the study are reported and discussed next in relation to two key themes that emerged from the analysis. The paper concludes with the broader implications that can be drawn from this study.

## The language learner ethnographer

To describe the aims of language learner ethnographers, in this section we bring together some of the most fundamental concepts and dimensions that inform their ethnographic practices: “culture”, “participant observation”, “third space” and “intercultural competence”. Like Roberts et al. (2001), we argue that the experience of living and studying abroad can prove complex and demanding, and that discussing these concepts and dimensions may enable us to understand how language learner ethnographers are expected to embrace ambivalence and change.

“Culture” is a notoriously slippery notion that has escaped clear definition to date. Defined broadly by Roberts et al. (2001) as an evolving connected activity that enables people to extend and sometimes to alter the conditions by which they live, this notion has experienced a major shift away from the common essentialist practice of treating cultures as rigidly bounded self-sustaining units towards a dynamic and anti-essentialist understanding of them (Gjerde, 2004; Grillo, 2003). Indeed, in one of his most widely-cited anthropological essays on language, culture and learning, Street (1993) formulated the proposition that *culture is a verb*, identifying two closely intertwined approaches that language learner ethnographers ought to follow in their studies. The first approach describes culture as an active process of creating meaning. The second approach emphasises the necessity to study definitions of the notion that fall into disuse in their efforts to serve different and competing purposes. At the heart of both these approaches, Holliday (1999; see also Holliday et al., 2017) explains, lies the “small culture” paradigm. In contrast to the “large culture” approach that sees cultures as coincidental with regions, countries and continents, the small culture paradigm conceptualises culture as the cohesive

behaviour of any social grouping upon which its members draw selectively to say or do particular things.

To study small culture behaviour during the year abroad, modern languages specialists (e.g. Dasli, 2011; Wilkinson, 2012) have argued that it is important to introduce language learner ethnographers to methods of ethnographic fieldwork early in an ethnography course. This is because these learners have little prior experience of engaging in ethnographic conversations as participant observers and are, therefore, likely to interpret small culture behaviour as defined by the country in which one lives. Referring to participant observation as the principal method of ethnography, O'Reilly (2009) distinguishes between "ordinary participant" and "participant observer". She suggests that unlike ordinary participants who rarely become involved in a community by close immersion, participant observers participate directly in the everyday life of a group, to obtain an insider's perspective of its members' social meanings and actions, while keeping a detailed record of all the behaviours observed. For this record to have value, Jordan (2001) and Roberts (2003) also advise language learner ethnographers not to "go native", as adopting the generalised characteristics of a group prevents researchers from producing a reliable account of the people being studied. Instead, they argue for maintaining a state of in-betweenness; that is, of being a community insider and outsider simultaneously.

In a recent pedagogical article that connects in-betweenness with the production of thirdness, MacDonald (2019) identifies two spatial metaphors that have been used extensively to explain what it means to live in-between: the "third place" (cf. Kramsch, 1993), and the "third space" (cf. Bhabha, 1994). He states that whereas the third place refers to the pedagogical site of the language classroom in which learners come to reflect upon their own and other cultural behaviours, the third space describes the interaction of two or more discursively constituted subjects who destabilise the homogenising identity of a culture in the process of reading its meanings and symbols anew. Because this third space is as hybrid as the multiple positions language learner ethnographers may occupy in the field, in this study we adopt the third space metaphor, which Jordan (2002) defines as follows:

It is a highly reflexive and constructive breathing space – a space for reflection on inter-cultural issues in need of resolution, on political issues concerning dominance and inequality. It is also the creative, dynamic space of action and interaction, the space for negotiating worlds through words. It is an ethical space, demanding self-knowledge, clear-sightedness, a readiness to listen and a preparedness to change. (pp. 101-102)

Findings from the Ealing Ethnography Research Project provide a useful illustration of students creating third spaces as they conducted their ethnographic studies abroad. For example, Roberts et al. (2001) direct attention to one study that used participant observation and interviews with transvestite prostitutes in Cadiz to describe how the language learner ethnographer empathised with a group whose meanings were different from his own. After realising that these prostitutes were as much as outsiders as he was in Spain, this learner found himself constantly engaging with the question of how to develop a reflexive ethnographic account of an "alien" set of cultural practices, thereby demonstrating an ethical obligation towards the group he was studying. Jordan (2001) notes that this obligation enabled the student not only to address issues

of representation, but also to raise awareness of the wider discourses that determined his participants' conduct.

To theorise the construction of third spaces during extended periods of residence abroad, many scholars (see Benson et al., 2013, for a comprehensive overview) have paid close attention to post-structuralist accounts of identity. Block (2007), for instance, who conceives of identity as inherently fragmented and contested in nature, describes how immersion in a new sociocultural environment destabilises the sense of identity individuals have of themselves as they strive to balance conflicting feelings of affirmation and negation. This effort, he argues, does not result in a half-and-half reformation, whereby individuals become half of what they were and half of what they have been exposed to, but in what Papastergiadis (2000) famously calls a *negotiation of difference* during which the past and the present encounter and transform each other. This is also Kinginger's (2013) perspective, who associates the negotiation of difference with the construction of "foreign-language mediated identities". She suggests that the construction of these identities requires modern languages sojourners to invest heavily in their learning, despite the on-going challenges they may experience, and that when they do, they are more likely to develop a reflexive disposition towards the populations they are studying.

Byram (1997) has proposed five enduring dimensions of intercultural competence that are intended to equip language learner ethnographers with the reflexive disposition required for ethnographic work: (1) *attitudes* of curiosity and openness to other cultures; (2) *knowledge* of how social groups and their identities function in one's own and in the interlocutor's country; (3) *skills of interpreting* a document or event from another culture and *relating* it to documents from one's own; (4) *skills of discovering and operationalising* new knowledge of a culture under the constraints of real-time interaction; and (5) *critical cultural awareness*, that is, the ability to evaluate perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures from a rational and explicit position (see also Byram et al., 2002, pp. 12–13). Byram (2003) uses the term "intercultural speaker" to refer to someone who has acquired these dimensions, explaining that this speaker brings into contact two sets of values, beliefs and behaviours when mediating between people of different origins and identifications. This explanation is echoed by Kramsch (1998), who attributes interactional dysfunctions to the cultural systems within which interlocutors have been socialised, suggesting further that awareness of these systems plays an important role in handling flexibly cases of miscommunication.

Although widely accepted, these dimensions of intercultural competence have also been subjected to considerable criticism. Holliday (2005, 2011), for example, has criticised the dimensions for treating cultures as large national entities, suggesting that they transfer agency away from the individual to culture itself. Dervin (2011) has also seen problems with the proposed dimensions, stating that they position cultures against each other, and arguing that presenting language learner ethnographers with generalised national values does little to foster their intercultural speaker development. This argument accords with the perspective held by Kramsch (2011), who (in an admirable critique of her own vision of intercultural competence) questions the dimensions for conceptualising culture as membership in a national community. By viewing culture as a fluid process enacted in discourse, Kramsch calls for an approach to intercultural language teaching that engages students in challenging conventionally agreed-upon truths as they



position themselves inside and outside the discourses of others. To counter these criticisms, Byram (2009) suggests that his dimensions focus strategically on national cultures to explore young people's identification with images of banal nationalism, thereby reinstating their importance for the language learner ethnographer.

We turn now to review the very few empirical studies that have been conducted on the language learner ethnographer to date.

### *Review of empirical studies*

Taking the lead from Roberts et al. (2001), Crawshaw et al. (2001) provided longitudinal data from advanced learners of French on the relationship between student diary writing and the formation of ethnographic identity in cross-cultural situations. The analysis of their data pointed to a set of discursive features that enabled participants to relativise the interactional experience and, as such, to generate a sense of self that stands between one's own and others' perceptions of it. Crucially, however, the researchers also reported that they did not find evidence of that self within the entire data set. In a subsequent publication that focused more intensively on those students' speaking and writing about the host culture, Tusting et al. (2002) described how participants used hedging and other mitigating strategies to construct cultural generalisations. The assumption was that students were aware of the negative associations of cultural generalisations and, therefore, deployed mitigating discourse features to block unfavourable evaluative inferences about themselves. In a study that included a series of in-depth interviews with advanced learners of English, Dasli (2012) also provided evidence of the use of such features. However, in contrast with the participants in these preceding studies those in Dasli's study had acquired little specialised knowledge of ethnography before commencing their year abroad.

Jackson (2006, 2008, 2010) has also researched extensively the sojourn experiences of students engaged in study abroad underpinned by a university course in ethnography. Because of this, she has been able not only to provide on-going support to Hong Kong English majors undertaking field research on a cultural scene of their choice, but also to monitor their intercultural speaker development, sensitivity and competence. In Jackson (2006), for instance, the researcher focused attention on a culture immersion programme that she designed specifically for these students, while in Jackson (2010) she described how this programme enabled participants to develop an appreciation of their own and others' worldviews. However, this study relied heavily on Hammer and Bennett's (2001) psychometric instrument for measuring one's orientation to cultural difference which, as the literature suggests (e.g. Shaules, 2007), lacks attention to specific adaptive demands. This is unexpected from Jackson, who in a previous publication (Jackson, 2008) argued that the learning situation of language learner ethnographers is far more complex than had been previously recognised, and that its complexity must be explored in relation to the conflicting aspects of identity these learners bring to the cross-cultural encounter.

Because our aim was to capture the ethnographic learning processes of 10 modern languages students from shortly before they embarked on their year abroad to the moment they returned, the present study collected data through pre-departure and post-return individual interviews and reflective diaries that students wrote during their sojourns. These methods were considered suitable for this study. They enabled us to



gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings that our participants attributed to their behaviours, and of the contexts that affected their perspectives. Before we present the methods of data collection and analysis, it is important first to provide a brief overview of the *Introduction to Ethnography* course that students attended before departure. This is followed by a presentation of participant profiles.

### **The *Introduction to Ethnography* course**

The *Introduction to Ethnography* course is a semester-long course of 33 contact hours offered in the second year of a four-year modern languages undergraduate degree programme. Its main aim is to introduce students to the conceptual and methodological foundations of ethnography so that they become prepared to undertake field research during the year abroad. After exploring the key question of what ethnography is, the course directs attention to characteristic features of ethnographic inquiry: prolonged engagement and participant observation; ethnographic conversations and interviewing; ethnographic data analysis and interpretation; and writing an ethnographic report. In doing so, it addresses issues with which professional ethnographers typically engage (e.g. how to establish field relations and how to distinguish between insider and outsider roles), before inviting students to undertake a short home ethnography project as a way of practising their newly-acquired skills. The primary reasons for requiring this home ethnography project were that students develop an understanding of the values that are particularly meaningful to a group only when they reflect on their own values, and that through reflection they learn to mediate more effectively between different cultural worlds. (Zhu, 2014, offers an overview of the arguments that favour home ethnography research.)

To foster the development of intercultural competence, the course also includes discussions that invite students to deconstruct stereotypes and generalisations. Among such discussions, one can identify “cultural identity” in which the aim is to focus on any small social grouping (e.g. neighbourhood, work group) in an attempt to challenge the idea of culture as nation. To achieve this, students first provide examples of values that may or may not be shared by all inhabitants of Britain and then consider them against a range of factors (e.g. age, class, gender, ethnicity, political and religious orientation) that account for possible intracultural differences. Next, they observe a small gathering of people where one or more of those factors are at play, before returning to the classroom with observation notes that encourage debate on the tension between one’s inherited and shifting identities. Course tutors have reported that this debate proves helpful for problematising the model of culture as nation and, thus, features prominently in the home ethnography report students submit as part of their assessment for the course.

Another debate that features in this report relates to students’ own attitudes towards the people who were observed as part of the aforementioned exercise. Indeed, course tutors had designed a wide range of questions that aimed to facilitate self-reflection on attitudinal issues, focusing both on the forms of behaviours (e.g. excessive politeness or swearing) that may affect one’s perceptions of others in a given context, and on the norms that students would wish to adopt, negotiate or reject in the process of reconstructing their foreign language identities. As tutors asserted, these questions were in line with Byram’s (2003) notion of “intercultural speaker”, because they required students to pay

close attention to cases of dysfunctional communication. Such cases may prove difficult to handle, particularly when the behaviours demonstrated exceed students' suggested limits of tolerance (Shaules, 2007). To counter the adverse effects of such communication, therefore, the course also included discussions of critical incident scenarios that show how identities are invoked, performed or contested in specific discursive spaces.

## Participants

After gaining ethical approval for the study, appropriate procedures were followed to recruit participants at the final lecture session of the Ethnography course, when the whole group met with their tutors to finalise year-abroad arrangements. These procedures involved negotiating access to the setting in which this session took place so that the first author could sit at the back of the lecture theatre until the time was appropriate to introduce the research topic to students and to invite them to participate in the study for one full academic year. (One full academic year lasts approximately nine months). From an approximate total of 70 modern languages learners who were present at the lecture, 10 volunteered to participate. It emerged that these volunteers were planning to return to their year-abroad destinations at the end of the degree programme and, therefore, viewed the individual interviews and reflective diaries as a unique opportunity for developing a greater awareness of the immersion experience and of what could be learned from it. Fully-informed consent was obtained from all participants before the beginning of the study.

Although the number of participating students is small when compared to the approximate total population of the Ethnography course, Cohen et al. (2011) argue that sample size matters little in qualitative studies that focus on the particularity of given cases. Some representation was, however, evident in this study, since the range of countries selected by the volunteers to spend the year abroad reflected those of the entire cohort, as did the types of placement undertaken. Countries typically include France, Germany, Italy and Spain (or a Latin American location), while placements range from studying in a partner university to working in a company or in a school as an English language teaching assistant. All participants were British between the ages of 20 and 22. Their first language was English. Six were male and four were female. Four had chosen to study in a partner university without undertaking some form of employment during their year abroad, while the remaining six students were employed in a company or in a school of their choice. From these six students, three worked as English language teaching assistants. With the exception of one participant who had chosen to spend his year abroad in Chile, all others had visited their respective destination country for no more than one week at some point in their lives. We use pseudonyms throughout the paper to ensure participant confidentiality.

## Methods

Two in-depth semi-structured interviews of about 90 minutes were conducted with each participant, the first a week before their departure, and the second shortly after their return from their year abroad. The main aim of these interviews was to capture the subjective experience of living between two cultures and, in so doing, to explore the

impact of ethnography on participating students' perceptions of themselves and others over an extended period of time. Following piloting with one participant at another university, an agreed set of pre-departure interview questions was developed, drawing on the literature reviewed in the second section of this paper, to consider issues that are relevant to the language learner ethnographer (conceptualisations of culture; attitudes towards the home and host populations; intercultural sensitivity; and intercultural speaker competence). The post-return interview reminded participants of the answers they had given during the pre-departure interview, and asked them to consider the extent to which their initial opinions had been confirmed or challenged during the sojourn. Guided by piloting work, questions about the actual lived experience of conducting an ethnographic study abroad were also asked in this interview. All of the interviews adopted Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) advice on active interviewing to explore how students turned to different stocks of knowledge to answer our questions in the process of co-constructing meaning with the interviewer. Interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed for analysis. When transcribing the interviews, we remained alert to advice given in the methods literature (e.g. Atkinson, 1992; Riesmann, 1993).

Education researchers (e.g. Dunlap, 2006; Dymont & O'Connell, 2011) have emphasised the value of journaling for students' academic and personal development. Accordingly, this study relied on one set of mid-year reflective diaries whose purpose was to explore the behavioural changes that can result from first-hand intercultural contact. Like both sets of interviews, these diaries also invited active engagement as they asked participants to describe as vividly as possible one positive or negative critical incident they had experienced with members of the host culture during the year abroad. We followed Hyers' (2018) advice that diarists complete their tasks independent of the researcher and, to achieve this, we gave participants a detailed set of instructions on the cover page of their diary packet. Instructions highlighted that although participants were expected to keep an online weekly record of their experiences, only one striking incident of their choice had to be submitted to the researchers half way through the sojourn. This was because, as Silverman (2017) notes, withdrawals are common in studies that make excessive demands on participants. Using a series of open-ended questions, the diaries then encouraged students to reflect on their incidents and to consider how they could be used as springboards for future learning and action. Reflections varied in length from five to eight pages and were discussed in detail in the post-return interview to help participants elaborate on the attitudes and opinions expressed. This interview also devoted time to discussing participants' weekly records. These records tended to be brief, with none exceeding 500 words in length.

To consider the voices and experiences of participants comprehensively, we began analysing the interview transcripts and diaries with the use of *Applied Thematic Analysis*. Applied thematic analysis draws on multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives to provide a rigorous set of analytical procedures that enables researchers to identify and examine themes from textual data (Guest et al., 2012). As such, each researcher individually and repeatedly read the interview transcripts and diaries, before meeting to discuss explicit and implicit emerging themes. During this meeting, we brought the existing theoretical and empirical literature together with the themes that had emerged from our individual analysis of the data and undertook a "partial triangulation protocol" (Farmer et al., 2006), investigating where findings from different components of the study were

consonant or contradictory. To refine our analysis, we then developed codes that captured the essence of the themes which were identified, noting the frequency with which these codes occurred and the relationship between them. In this way, we achieved intercoder agreement, or in Saldana's (2009) terms "interpretive convergence", before linking representative student quotations for each theme to specific codes. Guest et al. (2012) argue that grouping such quotations under given codes enables researchers to examine the overall patterns of discourse that are used by participants in a repetitive manner.

Given that this process identified strategies that mitigate the seriousness of negative cultural generalisations, we then undertook a *Critical Discourse Analysis* of prevailing themes, following Van Dijk's (1992) approach to the denial of prejudice. This approach suggests that because explicit outgroup derogation is strictly prohibited in western democratic societies, members of majority groups will choose to advance their arguments through the use of denials, disclaimers or other mitigating devices that combine an overall double strategy of "positive self-presentation" and "negative other-presentation". The primary function of this strategy is to prevent the formation of unfavourable impressions about the speaker or writer, thus enabling them to avoid being labelled as prejudiced (Galasińska & Galasiński, 2003). Among the mitigating devices that Van Dijk (1992) suggests are pertinent to prejudiced discourse, "apparent" and "transfer" disclaimers were used by our participants repeatedly in their interviews and diaries. Whereas apparent disclaimers constitute an advance prolepsis against actual or potential criticism, as in the phrase "I'm not prejudiced, but ...", transfer disclaimers, as their name suggests, transfer accusations of bias to the accuser for having misinterpreted the actor in the belief that attacks against one's moral integrity are illegitimate. Billig (1991) and Holt (1996) suggest that such disclaimers are often followed by the use of reported speech to strengthen claims that may risk refutation, adding that this speech enables speakers or writers to project themselves as rational, objective and fair.

The following sections present two key themes that emerged from our analysis: *students' perceptions of their host cultures* and *the impact of ethnography on students' perceptions*.

## Students' perceptions of their host cultures

As noted earlier, one key aim of the *Introduction to Ethnography* course was to enable students to deconstruct cultural stereotypes and generalisations. To investigate whether our participants had achieved this aim, the pre-departure interview always began with the question: *What are people in your host culture like?* With the exception of two students who admitted to not having engaged sufficiently with members of those cultures to be able to respond (**Richard**: "I don't know because I've not met any Chilean people"; **Zoe**: "Apart from my pen pal, I can't say I've met any other German people"), all referred to the kinds of generalisations and stereotypes the ethnography course was encouraging them to deconstruct. For instance, Hannah and Laura gave the following responses:

**Hannah**: The Spanish have a very laid-back kind of lifestyle. It's not pressure. It's not rushing around everywhere. It's something I'm looking forward to. (Pre-departure interview)

**Laura:** The Italians are extrovert, very sociable, happy people. They have a passion for life and a passion for everything they love. More family oriented than the English. Their family ties are a lot stronger than ours. (Pre-departure interview)

In these quotations both participants make culturally-generalising statements to describe what people in their host cultures are like, as if it were possible to replace one member of a culture with a seemingly identical other. As such, Hannah characterises the Spanish as “very laid-back” people who complete their daily tasks at their own pace, whereas Laura describes the Italians as “extrovert, very sociable, happy people” with “a passion for everything they love”. To support her suggestion, Laura also compares and contrasts the family ties she perceives to characterise the Italian and English populations, thereby placing these populations against each other. Such a comparison, Holliday (2005) explains, is not only used to construct the other as opposite to the familiar in contexts where cultures become conterminous with countries, but also to express desires that are often deemed inappropriate at home. These are detected in the concluding part of Hannah’s quotation, where she states: “it’s something I’m looking forward to” to contrast her presumably complex English lifestyle to the unpressurised Spanish other, thereby achieving nothing more than to construct that other generically.

In the following quotation drawn from his pre-departure interview, Michael makes similar cultural generalisations about the French which, unlike Hannah and Laura, he constructs in a rather blatantly negative way.

**Michael:** I find the French very arrogant. If you can’t speak their language fluently, they reply in English. It’s as if they’re telling you, ‘Look, you can’t speak my language better than me’. I suppose it can be the same in England. But, here there are positive aspects as well. The English have a good sense of humour. Some people don’t understand it. But, if they could understand it, they’d really enjoy it. (Pre-departure interview)

This quotation begins with Michael’s negative characterisation of the French as “very arrogant”, which he takes care to justify with reference to one specific example. We see this when Michael states that “if you can’t speak their language, they reply in English” and, in so doing, deploys the discursive device of reported speech that serves to establish the factual accuracy of questionable descriptions (Holt, 1996): “it’s as if they’re telling you, ‘Look, you can’t speak my language better than me’”. Realising, however, that his description may indeed be questioned, Michael soon repairs it by suggesting that the behaviour “can be the same in England”. In this way he engages in the double strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation that enables him to appear balanced, before proceeding to counteract the potentially face-damaging impact that his repair statement may have made on his English counterparts. This can be found towards the end of the quotation, where he speaks about the “positive aspects” of England in association with the “good sense of humour” he believes his co-nationals have, and where he acknowledges that “some people don’t understand it”. Such acknowledgements, Van Dijk (1992) explains, can be termed “apparent concessions” because they enable speakers to deflect potential criticism, particularly when their statements are followed by negative comments on the foreign other: “if they could understand it, they’d really enjoy it”.

Similar efforts to deflect the criticism that may follow negative cultural generalisations are also found in almost all mid-year reflective diaries. In the following quotation taken

from David's diary, for example, we see how he uses personal experience to support the suggestion that "the major thing about being in Italy is to understand the Italians".

**David:** There's a lot going on about respect in Italy. I touched my friend's face. It was a flip, like 'come on boy', as we do in England, and he wouldn't speak to me. He was like, 'you should understand what this means to an Italian'. I understand and I shouldn't have done it. But, when he does wrong things, I wouldn't worry about it. The difference is that culturally he is so angry I can't understand him. But, if he can't understand me, he's expecting me to say it doesn't matter. He never comes to the middle of it. (Mid-year reflective diary)

After suggesting that "there's a lot going on about respect in Italy", David offers one plausible explanation for why his Italian friend "wouldn't speak to him". We see this in the beginning of the quotation, where David states that "I touched my friend's face", and then goes on to clarify what this touch entailed: "it was a flip, like 'come on boy', as we do in England". There follows his friend's response to the "flip" – "you should understand what this means to an Italian" – which David formulates through reported speech, and the remark "I understand and I shouldn't have done it" that serves to prevent the formation of negative impressions. The participant then engages in the double strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation through the use of a "transfer disclaimer" (Van Dijk, 1992) that enables him to present himself as more tolerant than the Italian actor – "when he does wrong things, I wouldn't worry about it" – before making his final evaluative judgements. These are found in the concluding part of the quotation, where David labels his friend as "so angry", while also stating what he expects of David to say when they engage in a cultural argument. The remark: "he never comes to the middle of it" possibly seeks to convince the reader that, in contrast to the Italian actor, this participant is able to mediate between two cultures as effectively as Byram's (2003) intercultural speaker. (Debates about the intercultural speaker featured prominently in the Ethnography course.)

We found very few examples of intercultural speaker mediation in the spoken and written data our participants produced that could have enabled them to construct foreign-language mediated identities. One such example is offered by Emma, who recalls a situation she reported in one of her weekly records to describe how she approached French members of staff in the school where she was employed. The quotation follows a passage of talk within the post-return interview in which Emma remarks "the young people didn't want to have to do anything with you" and the interviewer asks: *Can you give me an example?*

**Emma:** When I went into the boarding school setting, we had to eat every meal with the domestic staff and they didn't want to talk to us. They believed we had nothing to say, because we were collectively three English people sitting together. So, I started writing little conversation starters for lunch time, because often I'd start a conversation and I'd get a one-word response. But, when I started preparing conversations and knew what to say afterwards, they started engaging with me. I did that for two weeks and then I didn't need it, because they were prepared to talk to me. (Post-return interview)

Following the interviewer's clarification question, Emma proceeds to justify her negative view of young people in France by recounting one incident she experienced with "domestic staff" in the school where she was employed. She does this at the beginning of the quotation, where she says that the incident revolved around meal times and, in so

doing, deploys the first- and third-person plural pronouns “we” and “they” to distinguish the English and French groups who were present. Realising, however, that her group might have been responsible for why “they didn’t want to talk to us”, Emma soon explains that it was “because we were collectively three English people sitting together”. In this way she appears to echo the point made by year-abroad researchers (e.g. Jackson, 2012) that a negative student mindset jeopardises host-sojourner relationships, before proceeding to disassociate herself from the English group. This is found in the remainder of the quotation, where she replaces the use of “we” with “I” to report the efforts she made to approach the domestic staff and where she suggests that these efforts were successful. From this, it may be inferred that Emma has acquired Byram’s (1997) dimension of openness to the host culture which could make us wonder why she made the earlier negative evaluation of young French people.

The quotations we have analysed in this section reflect clearly the cultural stereotypes and generalisations our participants made in the process of describing their host cultures. Although some of these generalisations are more blatantly negative than others, as in the case of Michael, common to all is the use of discursive strategies that mitigate the impact of potentially problematic expressions. Previous studies on the language learner ethnographer (e.g. Tusting et al., 2002) have identified similar strategies for talking and writing about the other, thereby providing supporting evidence for how these learners organise their arguments rhetorically to avoid being labelled as prejudiced. Given, however, that such strategies are also deployed by students who have not attended a relevant ethnographic course (Dasli, 2012), the next section investigates the possible impact of ethnography on our participants’ perceptions of their host cultures.

## The impact of ethnography on students’ perceptions of their host cultures

The first quotations that enable us to explore the impact of ethnography on our participants’ perceptions are drawn from George and Emma’s pre-departure interviews. In these interviews George and Emma discuss possible ways for operating in a new cultural environment, having considered carefully the advice of the *Introduction to Ethnography* course on this matter.

**George:** I should definitely introduce some new ideas. I mean I don’t know how exactly France is going to be, but I feel new ideas will help the French culture to grow. (Pre-departure interview)

**Emma:** The approach I’ve decided to follow is to observe and then adapt my behaviour to what people may be expecting. I don’t want to be offensive. (Pre-departure interview)

What is apparent from these quotations is that these participants propose diametrically opposed ways for operating in a new cultural environment. Thus, although recognising that “he doesn’t know how exactly France is going to be”, George suggests that he will introduce ideas that may enable his French hosts to grow, whereas Emma proposes adapting her behaviour to what might be expected of her for fear of becoming offensive should she operate otherwise. The relevant year-abroad and ethnographic literature favour neither of these extreme positions. Pennycook (1998), for example, identifies similarities between the position George intends to adopt and the steps Robinson



Crusoe undertook to teach Friday English. He points out that such a position constitutes the epitome of imperialist mastery over the foreign other, as it limits the possibilities that the intercultural encounter makes available to the self. Roberts et al. (2001) focus attention on the other end of this positional spectrum, where Emma's view seems to sit. They argue that going native is as repressive as changing someone culturally and advise language learner ethnographers to consider the negative consequences that both positions are likely to bring about.

The mid-year reflective diaries and post-return interviews indicated that only two participants considered the consequences of both positions as the year abroad progressed. To illustrate, in the following quotation from his reflective diary, Thomas states that "it's important to bring two cultures into a relationship". He then moves on to describe how he attempted to achieve this when teaching a young French boy English as part of the ethnographic research he was undertaking.

**Thomas:** The other day I suggested we both have photographs with us, any photographs of when we were on holiday. We both talked about the places we've been, what we did, who was there with us. I wanted to recreate memories, what was important about the experience. Much of it wasn't in English. This didn't bother me at all. The point was to get to know each other. (Mid-year reflective diary)

In this quotation Thomas recounts the steps he followed so that he and his student could "get to know each other". He begins by suggesting that they could focus on "any photographs of when they were on holiday" to give his student freedom of choice, and then moves on to refer to what was discussed: "... the places we've been, what we did, who was there with us". Thomas is possibly aware that such discussions can often turn into simple information exchanges between idealised native speakers and foreign language users (see Risager, 2007 for a critique), because he quickly proceeds to specify the learning objective for his teaching episode. This can be seen in the middle of the quotation, where he states that "I wanted to recreate memories ...", in addition to revealing that "much of the discussion wasn't in English". Thomas is, perhaps, correct to argue that "this didn't bother him at all", because the memories he has attempted to recreate may go well beyond interpreting a document from the point of view of another culture. Indeed, Jordan (2002) has explained that third spaces emerge out of personal story-telling and that this story-telling is important for reimagining the person one wishes to become.

Another convincing attempt to create third spaces was made by Neil, who relied on the stories his participants told during interviews to demystify current discussions about migration in Rome. In the following quotation drawn from his post-return interview, Neil explains why he chose to focus on migration and what conclusions he drew from the analysis of his interview data. (Albeit briefly, Neil presented the topic of his ethnographic investigation in two of his weekly records, noting difficulties to recruit participants).

**Neil:** I went for pizza and found that the waiter spoke pigeon Italian, because he was not Italian. And soon after I started hearing people saying that migrants join the Italian mafia. I thought there's something more than this. So, my host university helped me to contact the migrant community in Rome and this is how my project started. The majority of people I interviewed said they came to Italy because they had no job at home. So, as with any group

of people, there are those who give their group a good name and those who don't. (Post-return interview)

This quotation begins with Neil's reasons for focusing on the question of migration in Rome, referring to his observations – “the waiter spoke pigeon Italian” – and sceptical attitude towards people who complain that “migrants join the Italian mafia”. To support the initial explicit idea that “there's something more than this”, Neil proceeds to explain how the planned study started. The statement that “his host university helped him to contact the migrant community” may not flatter Neil, given that he had already received input on how to negotiate field access during the Ethnography course. However, as Roberts et al. (2001) have argued, minor incompetencies do not always affect the conclusions that language learner ethnographers draw from their ethnographic projects. For Neil, this can be seen in the concluding part of his quotation where, in addition to suggesting that “his interviewees came to Italy because they had no job at home”, he also notes that “there are those who give their group a good name and those who don't” to dismantle the negative construction of migrants he reports in the beginning of his account.

Not all participants constructed the kinds of third spaces that are evident in the previous two quotations, possibly because of the ‘unusual’ cultural practices they reported observing in the course of conducting ethnographic research. For example, Richard appears to have retained the view that “he has nothing in common with these people” when speaking about one such practice in his post-return interview, thereby supporting the argument that strong attitudes remain resistant to change, particularly when they emerge from direct observation (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995).

**Richard:** All the native women spent their days sitting on the streets selling corn and chickens, some alive and others plucked and ready for cooking, whilst their men were harvesting the corn and feeding the chickens. When their husbands did happen to wander into town, they'd all be wearing cowboy hats, cheap boots, shirts and trousers. To accompany this, they'd have a machete and a 9mm stuffed down their pants. I soon realised I'd nothing in common with these people. I spent all my time with Americans. (Post-return interview)

In the preceding quotation Richard makes a number of generalisations about the native women and men he observed to explain why he chose to detach himself from the host population. To achieve this, he first uses the predeterminer “all” to suggest that the behaviours are typical of the whole group and then proceeds to enhance the observational dimension and, hence, truthfulness of the description with rich details. We detect these throughout the description, where Richard refers to the daily activities of both women and men and where he remarks that the men “wear cowboy hats, cheap boots, shirts and trousers”. As if these details are insufficient to make the desired impact, Richard moves on to make more derogatory comments targeted at the native men – “they'd have a machete and a 9 mm stuffed down their pants” – to justify his preference for “spending all his time with Americans”. By so doing, he manages to imply that his lack of engagement with the host population is based on valid reasons, while maintaining the positive self-image most language learner ethnographers projected in the previous section.

Although recognising efforts to construct third spaces, the analysis has on the whole revealed that ethnography made little impact on participants' perceptions of their host

cultures. This finding contrasts sharply with the outcomes of previous year abroad studies (e.g. Jackson, 2010) that ethnography offers significant benefits to student sojourners, urging us to consider possible reasons why we have not detected such benefits for our participants. The following section considers these reasons in relation to the mitigating discourse strategies we found within the interview and diary data, drawing appropriate implications for policy-makers and ethnographic course designers.

## Conclusion and implications

This longitudinal qualitative study explored the ethnographic learning processes of 10 modern languages students who spent one full academic year abroad, having first completed successfully an *Introduction to Ethnography* course in the UK. It began from the argument that although significant attempts have been made to integrate ethnography into modern languages undergraduate degree programmes, relatively little is known about its actual impact on modern languages sojourners. Drawing on active interviews and reflective diaries that were designed to explore this impact from shortly before participants embarked on their year abroad to the moment they returned, the thematic and critical discourse analysis of the data focused attention on two key themes: students' perceptions of their host cultures and the impact of ethnography on these perceptions.

Regarding the first theme, findings on the whole reveal that students' perceptions of their host cultures were derogatory and that they used a number of mitigating discourse strategies to avoid creating a negative impression on the researchers. Indeed, Galasińska and Galasiński (2003) have suggested that researchers can be easily assumed not to share their participants' evaluative judgements in contexts where the social norm against ethnocentrism is strong, explaining how mitigating discourse strategies attenuate the face-damaging impact of ethnocentric expressions. Our participants' attempts to attenuate this impact were identifiable in almost all the data they produced, possibly because they regarded us as year-abroad experts who encourage students to recognise the value of the ethnographic learning experience. When asking questions about this experience, we made every effort not to refer to the actual or potential benefits that ethnography is argued to bestow on modern languages sojourners, but to elicit diverse perspectives on its possible impact. To achieve this, we combined Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) approach to active interviewing (and reflective diary writing) with the thematic and critical discourse analysis of the data, thereby concentrating on both the what and the how something was said or written. Very few, if any, previous studies on the language learner ethnographer have used such a methodological combination, possibly because of their somewhat exclusive focus either on the strategies used to mitigate the impact of cultural generalisations (e.g. Tusting et al., 2002) or on participants' substantive information (e.g. Jackson, 2010).

Findings from the second theme indicate that ethnography made little impact on most participants, given that their cultural generalisations about the foreign other remained almost intact throughout the year abroad. To explain this finding, we concur with Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), who argue that although ethnography remains increasingly suspicious of the generalisations that often can be drawn from the study of particular cases, it has not, as yet, provided a definitive solution to the problem of

generalisation. We suggest that this problem could have been greater for participants, since they were expected to acquire Byram's (1997) dimensions of intercultural competence during the *Introduction to Ethnography* course. (These dimensions, as we have shown in a preceding section, equate culture with country). It is thus not surprising to have seen most participants generalising some of the cultural issues they were studying to the entire population of the countries concerned, despite having been advised by their course tutors not to do so. One limitation of this study is that it did not use classroom observations of the Ethnography course to consider exactly how the deconstruction of cultural generalisations was linked to the acquisition of intercultural competence. Even so, examination of curricular documents and students' accounts did provide evidence in support of the literature (e.g. Dervin, 2011; Holliday, 2011; Kramsch, 2011) that has critiqued the dimensions, since it showed how problems with essentialism return in courses that use these dimensions to deconstruct generalisations.

These findings have important pedagogical implications for ethnographic course designers and policy-makers who appear to support homogenising conceptualisations of culture despite having criticised them. This is because, as Holliday (2011) argues, these stakeholders tend to return to the items of literature that are used to explain differences among national cultures, thereby treating individual behaviours not as realities in their own right, but as exceptions to the essentialist rule. Given his advisory role in the Council of Europe Language Policy Division, it could be argued that Byram is one of the stakeholders who has returned to this literature in two of his widely-read publications. In Byram (2003) this stakeholder points out that although the dimensions of intercultural competence pay close attention to small social groupings, they take national cultures as the basis for investigation because of the connections they have with the official language of the state modern languages students may wish to learn. Small groupings and their preferred linguistic codes, therefore, not only remain peripheral to the dominant approach, but also constitute a subset of the national culture. The same argument is expressed in Byram (2009). To sustain the idea of culture as nation, Byram directs attention to celebrated accounts of ethnographic fieldwork that completely ignore the dynamic nature of identity construction for the sake of national unity. The question then of how modern languages educators can address pedagogically the influence that these accounts exert on language learner ethnographers may arise.

An initial response to this question has been offered by Ferri (2018), who encourages modern languages educators to problematise widely-accepted models of intercultural competence. She argues that problematisation should not just concentrate on the prescribed cultural features that obscure the rich complexity of intercultural interaction, but also on the concrete methodological procedures that prevent student ethnographers from engaging intersubjectively with the people being researched. Holliday and MacDonald (2020) propose three principles for ethnographic research which could be usefully referred to by these students. While the first principle suggests that nationality should not be posited as an a priori category in such research, the remaining two principles focus on researchers' developing engagement with the research setting and the emergent contextual conditions that favour the careful use of specific data-gathering and data analysis methods. Where interviews are deployed, attention should be paid to the interpersonal politics of the interview encounter and the circumstances that affect the

collaborative creation of meaning. Future research on the language learner ethnographer could focus on the ways in which these three recently-formulated principles are discussed in relevant ethnographic courses to examine the impact they may make on modern languages sojourners' mediated identities.

To conclude, although we do not claim to draw any concrete conclusions from the study of a small number of language learner ethnographers, our findings suggest that there may still be a long way to go before researchers can declare confidently that ethnography provides indisputable benefits to modern languages sojourners. Against the backdrop of a wounded Brexit economy that makes the resources and the opportunities for going abroad increasingly scarce, we urge ethnographic course designers to recognise the dangers that come with the predominant framing of culture as nation before our rather gloomy UK-based findings become the only recent research data that other year-abroad researchers may choose to cite in their studies.

## Note

1. At the time of revising this paper for resubmission, the UK had withdrawn from the European Union and, subsequently, from the ERASMUS scheme. A new study and residence abroad scheme, named after the English mathematician Alan Turing, will commence in September 2021 for British students (Department for Education, 2020).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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